

THE
MEDALLION

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

FALL 2022

**TEXAS FORTS
OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER**

TAKE A DETOUR FROM I-10 AND DISCOVER
THE THC'S HISTORIC SITES



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To protect and preserve the state's historic and prehistoric resources for the use, education, enjoyment, and economic benefit of present and future generations.

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 REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES

ABOVE, TOP: Alley Oop Fantasy Land in Iraan just off I-10 in West Texas (story on page 6). ON THE COVER: Fort Lancaster in Sheffield is undergoing adobe restoration. Photo by Patrick Hughey.





TEXAS STATE
REPRESENTATIVE
ANDREW S. MURR
HOUSE DISTRICT 53
LEADERSHIP LETTER

The State of Texas is blessed with incredibly historic county courthouses that stand as the hearts of many communities. In February 2021, one of these beloved treasures was tragically lost to fire in Mason County, located in my district.

County Judge Jerry Bearden and his constituents across Mason County are still feeling the loss of this important building, although hope is on the horizon as it continues to be rebuilt under the guidance of the Texas Historical Commission (THC) and other preservation professionals.

Before the fire, the county was working for more than a decade toward the courthouse's preservation, and Judge Bearden was a consistent and vocal advocate of the project. The THC had awarded a grant of more than \$4 million for its full restoration, allowing Mason County residents to see the courthouse returned to its original glory.

After the fire, I worked with my colleagues in the Texas Legislature to secure an additional appropriation of \$6 million to help Mason County achieve that ambitious objective.

Using biennial legislative appropriations since 1999, the THC has helped more than 70 Texas counties rebuild, restore, and preserve their courthouses. I am proud of the counties I represent that have sought to preserve and restore their courthouses with the assistance of the THC and I am encouraged that Mason County is on track to be part of this esteemed group.

The courthouse is just one of many heritage tourism attractions that I encourage Texans to visit in my district. This issue of *The Medallion* features several of them, including two of the agency's frontier forts—McKavett and Lancaster.

I'm fortunate to have the unique opportunity to represent an area of Texas embedded with the history, culture, and traditions of this great state. It represents a portion of our history that friends and supporters of the THC help to promote and preserve for all of us.

Very sincerely,

Andrew S. Murr

State Representative, House District 53

WELCOME TO THE THC

AGENCY ADDS FOUR NEW HISTORIC SITES ACROSS THE STATE

By Andy Rhodes
Managing Editor, *The Medallion*

Eighteen historic sites...will transition to the Texas Historical Commission on January 1, 2008...the beginning of what THC Chairman John L. Nau, III believes will become the best historic sites program in the nation.

This was in the lead paragraph of a *Medallion* article from Fall 2007. Fifteen years later, the Texas Historical Commission (THC) is the proud steward of twice as many historic sites in all corners of Texas. Nau is again the agency's chairman, and his vision is being fulfilled as the THC's 36 historic sites continue to grow in numbers and significance.

During the past two years—specifically since the 2020 legislative session—the agency has been busily expanding this legacy by adding four new sites and tackling upgrade projects at its historic properties, totaling 36 across the state.

The most recent news is the official transfer of the Bush Family Home (Midland) and Presidio la Bahía (Goliad) to the THC. The agency also added Palmito Ranch Battlefield (Brownsville) and the Old Socorro Mission site (El Paso) to its roster of state historic sites.



The **Bush Family Home** is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the residence of an exceptional political family who shaped state and national politics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, contributing two U.S. presidents, a first lady, a vice president, a second lady, and two state governors.

The Bush family spent 1952–56 at the modest yet comfortable 1939 Midland house. It reflects the lives of the family through informative exhibits, photos, and furnishings. One of the highlights is George W.'s childhood room, filled with 1950s memorabilia depicting the activities he was involved with at the time, such as Cub Scouts, Little League baseball, and the Roy Rogers fan club.

The **Palmito Ranch Battlefield** is dedicated to the Battle of Palmito Ranch, the final land battle of the Civil War on May 12–13, 1865. It was fought along the banks of the Rio Grande, 13 miles east of Brownsville and 10 miles from a Union-held seaport at Texas' southern tip. The battle took place more than a month after Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender to Union forces. Although there are no facilities at the site, visitors can view interpretive panels and a nearby THC marker dedicated to the battle.



FAR LEFT: Bush Family Home. CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: Palmito Ranch Battlefield, Old Socorro Mission site, and Presidio La Bahía.



The **Old Socorro Mission** site near El Paso is another location currently without facilities. It preserves the location of a Franciscan mission, Nuestra Señora de La Limpia Concepción de los Piros de Socorro del Sur, founded in 1682. The mission served Spanish families and Native American communities displaced from New Mexico during the Pueblo Revolt. It was rebuilt at least twice, destroyed by Rio Grande flooding in 1829, and ultimately relocated closer to El Paso.

Presidio la Bahía, established in 1749 and featured in the previous issue of *The Medallion*, was crucial to the development of Texas. Perhaps best known as the site of the March 1836 Goliad Massacre, it now features exhibits about the region's Spanish Colonial and Revolution-era heritage, along with lodging accommodations for up to four guests.

To learn more about the THC's historic sites, visit texashistoricsites.com.



FRONTIER TIMES

TAKE A MID-1800S DETOUR TO THE THC'S WEST TEXAS FORTS

Travelers heading west of San Antonio on Interstate 10 can witness the landscape transform. Hills and cedars slowly become mesas and mesquites. Green fades into orange. It's easy to imagine the frontier out here, and that's the primary preservation goal of the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) forts staff.

Two of the forts—McKavett and Lancaster—recently wrapped up impressive projects that help visitors experience what life was like in the wilds of West Texas more than 150 years ago. Both sites are telling their distinctive stories via refurbished attractions, including telegraph lines, stabilized ruins, and visitors centers.

Fort McKavett's telegraph-line idea was first raised by Assistant Site Manager Kevin Malcolm, who had been long intrigued by the fort's cutting-edge communications system introduced in 1875.

"Kevin has a military and engineering background, so he proposed the initial idea and we just spitballed off that," says Site Manager Cody Mobley. "No other site in Texas interprets this aspect of military history, and we're proud to be able to tell the story here at Fort McKavett."

A few years ago, Malcolm and Mobley developed an ambitious plan to not only reintroduce the telegraph line, but to authentically install it themselves.

"We tried to incorporate historic materials as much as we could with period construction methods," Malcolm



The road to Fort Lancaster.

says. "It was really interesting to think about what kinds of factors they'd have to consider out here in 1875. We even had horses draw the logs up, just like they would have back then."

The project reflects Fort McKavett's mission to educate visitors with an authentic, grassroots approach.

"We had the motivation and means to take care of just about everything for this project—it helps us control costs and maintain quality," Mobley says. "As long as it's in the site's master plan, we'll try to take care of it ourselves."

With that in mind, Mobley adds that Fort McKavett has also introduced foodways programming to its interpretation and events.

Site Educator Rhett Kearns is overseeing the project, which demonstrates what a typical meal would be like for up to 20 soldiers at the fort, including traditional fare like stew with venison or Army beef, rice, potatoes, onions, and carrots.

"They had a garden that provided some nice fresh alternatives to dry foods," he says. "Being a cook here was a pretty good assignment. You got to eat a bit more and do something a little different than everyone else."

LIFE AT LANCASTER

About 100 miles west lies the THC's **Fort Lancaster**, which offers a different view of frontier Texas in the 1850s. Although the original adobe structures were claimed by the elements decades

ago, the sweeping vistas of the region are an undeniable attraction.

“Fort Lancaster is a great stop to experience life at a frontier fort,” says Melissa Hagins, executive director of the Texas Pecos Trail Region. “Being on the grounds you can really experience what it was like to live in the middle of nowhere with the wide-open spaces.”

Site Manager Jefferson Spilman agrees, adding, “You don’t really have to imagine what it looked like on the frontier out here—you’re literally experiencing it.”

Spilman explains that soldiers constructed the buildings in the mid-1850s using a combination of limestone blocks and adobe bricks. Over the past 170 years, these materials were lost to the elements, so the only physical remnants are a few well-intentioned reconstructions from decades ago.



Spilman and his staff worked with Historic Sites Division architects, historical contractors Phoenix 1, and an adobe brick company in Marfa for masonry and adobe restoration at Barracks Company H near the newly renovated visitors center. The project stabilized existing masonry by repointing mortar joints and using salvaged stone.

“A big part of the project was to square away the corners and add several layers of adobe brick to help visitors really visualize what the buildings looked like back then,” he says.

Earlier this year, Spilman and other THC staff embarked on another preservation project at the far end of the fort’s massive parade ground. They used a new Ground Penetrating Radar device to survey the fort’s cemetery to confirm the gravesite

of Private J.H. Norris, who died in November 1861 from pneumonia while stationed at Fort Lancaster.

The monument was placed at his gravesite in January 1862; the original headstone remains at Norris’ grave and is now preserved in an enclosure. Fort staff also confirmed four additional graves in the cemetery.

“Sometimes people come out here to enjoy that the site hasn’t changed much—they find comfort in the stability,” Spilman says. “But we also want to provide updated insights about the fort and new ways for people to learn more about this great site in Texas history.”



ABOVE: Fort McKavett’s Rhett Kearns prepares a traditional stew. LEFT: Fort McKavett’s Kevin Malcolm demonstrates the telegraph key.



EXIT STRATEGIES

For those visiting the THC's forts along Interstate 10 (I-10), several nearby communities in the Texas Pecos Trail region offer heritage attractions that make getting off the highway worthwhile.

"The Pecos Trail has 22 counties, so we have a lot of different geographic regions just within our region," Hagins says. "This part along I-10 shows the diversity of our state in the geographic terrain."

Travelers can explore the region's frontier past at Sonora's historic downtown square, anchored by the stately 1891 **Sutton County Courthouse**, restored through the THC's Historic Courthouse Preservation Program. The handsome two-story structure of native stone is

considered one of the finest examples of 19th-century architecture on the Edwards Plateau.

Just across the street is the welcoming **Old Sonora Ice House Ranch Museum**, showcasing the community's history with an impressive array of pioneer-era artifacts in the 1923 namesake icehouse. The museum includes exhibits dedicated to ranching heritage, the mohair industry, and Will Carver, a member of Butch Cassidy's famous Wild Bunch gang.

A notable attraction near Fort McKavett is **Presidio San Saba** in Menard. The presidio, established in 1757, was abandoned and fell into ruins until the 1936 Texas Centennial Commission



TIMELESS

Believe it or not, this ambrotype photo was taken in 2020, not 1875.

Fort McKavett Site Manager Cody Mobley created it as part of "50 Miles by Wire: 1875." For the event, 50 reenactors from 15 states portrayed the 10th Infantry Regiment by installing a telegraph line, simulating the historic line to San Antonio. The telegraph will be available for site visitors during special programs.

Mobley explains that motts (groves) of ashe juniper thrived in the valleys during the mid-1800s just south of the fort near Telegraph, named for the harvested trees' fate. This legacy was preserved in 2020 with the donation of seven ashe juniper logs from Paint Creek Ranch to build the fort's new telegraph poles.

contracted for a somewhat inaccurate “reconstruction.” The THC assisted with a major restoration project at the presidio about a decade ago to address critical structural problems from the 1930s project.

Fifteen miles west of Sonora is an undeniably historic attraction, the approximately 2-million-year-old **Caverns of Sonora**. The colossal and breathtaking caverns were discovered by ranchers in the 1930s and is now designated as a National Natural Landmark. Descending more than 150 feet below ground, visitors are transported into an otherworldly landscape, surrounded by cream-colored calcite formations resembling bulbous outcroppings and dripping mountains.

About 30 miles west of the caverns on I-10 is **Ozona**, named for its impressive quantity of open air (ozone). As the only town in 2-million-acre Crockett County, Ozona serves as the county seat and is considered the midpoint on the interstate between Houston and El Paso.

The pecan tree-shaded downtown square is lined with charming historic



buildings, including the **1902 Second Empire-style courthouse**. Another is a three-story 1926 structure that housed a church, hospital, and courthouse annex before becoming the **Crockett County Museum**. Known as “the biggest little museum in Texas,” it features more than a dozen exhibit rooms including an impressive American Indian display, frontier-era artifacts, and even a local man’s enviable pencil collection.

For fans of the funny pages, it’s worth making the 10-minute detour north of I-10 near Sheffield to **Iraan**.

The town’s odd name is tied to the 1926

oil gusher that blew in on Ira and Ann Yates’ Pecos County ranch, resulting in a new town using a blend of the landowners’ first names.

During the oil boom, a field worker and budding cartoonist named V.T. Hamlin, inspired by the region’s prehistoric past, conjured up Dinny the Dinosaur and time-traveling caveman Alley Oop. One of the longest-running comic strips in the U.S., this legacy is celebrated at the Instagram-worthy roadside attraction **Alley Oop Fantasy Land**, featuring giant reproductions of Alley and Dinny.

To learn more about the THC’s Pecos Trail Region, visit texaspecostrail.com.



OPPOSITE, TOP: Fort Lancaster’s Jefferson Spilman describes the ruins stabilization project. ABOVE: Presidio San Saba. LEFT: Historic downtown Ozona.

BATTLEFIELD BACKGROUND

DISCOVER BATTLE SITE'S DOMESTIC ORIGIN AND GRUESOME AFTERMATH

By Cait Johnson
Lead Educator, San Jacinto Battleground

Before it was the site where Texas won its independence, the San Jacinto Battleground was a cattle ranch owned by Peggy McCormick.

Peggy was born in Ireland, likely around 1788. Along with her husband, Arthur, and two sons, John and Michael, Peggy immigrated to New Orleans in 1818 and then to Texas circa 1824, making the McCormicks part of Austin's Old Three Hundred.

The family settled on the southern bank of Buffalo Bayou and were officially granted the deed for a league of land on August 10, 1824, by Stephen F. Austin. The McCormicks built a log cabin near the southwest shore of a small bay on the San Jacinto River known as Peggy's Lake and began to raise cattle.

Arthur McCormick's neighbor, Dr. Johnson Hunter, surveyed his land circa January 1825. In the days before precise maps, local landmarks marked the boundaries of a property—the McCormicks' league was measured from a four-inch persimmon tree near the San Jacinto River. Because they were planning on using their land for grazing, Arthur asked Hunter to avoid the marshy ground bordering the rivers to the north and east, and focus instead on the open prairie.

In February 1825, Arthur traveled to San Felipe de Austin to discuss a plan to establish a colony of Irish immigrants in Texas. Austin granted him the credentials for the project, but Arthur drowned on the return trip while trying to cross Buffalo Bayou and the project fell apart. His property passed to his widow Peggy, who stayed on the land and continued to raise cattle to sell at the Louisiana markets.



“TO THE DEVIL WITH YOUR GLORIOUS HISTORY!”

Like most civilians during the Texas Revolution, Peggy fled east in April 1836 before the Battle of San Jacinto, although her youngest son Michael served as a courier for the Texas government during the war. She returned home shortly after the battle, only to find that her corn and cattle had been taken by both the Texas and Mexican armies, and her property was covered with the unburied bodies of hundreds of Mexican soldiers.

By all accounts, it was a grisly sight. William Zuber, a private in the Texas Army, recalled the battlefield with horror:

“After breakfast on the morning of the twenty-third [April 1836], I walked alone to the battlefield. The slain Mexicans were a ghastly sight. Exposed first to a drenching rain and then to a burning sun, they were decaying rapidly and could not be moved without breaking into pieces. They sent forth a sickening stench.”

Horrified, Peggy rode to the Texian camp and demanded General Houston bury the bodies, telling him that the sight



would haunt her for the rest of her life. But he refused. The Texas Army claimed to not have enough willing men to both guard the prisoners and bury such a large number of dead. Houston suggested that General Santa Anna order his men to do the task, but he refused and suggested the Texans burn the corpses instead.

Houston tried to calm Peggy down by telling her, “Madam, your land will be famed in history as the classic spot upon which the glorious victory of San Jacinto was gained! Here was born, in the throes of revolution, and amid the strife of contending legions, the infant of Texan independence!”

Unimpressed, Peggy responded, “To the devil with your glorious history!”

The bodies of the Mexican soldiers lay on Peggy’s land through the summer and fall. Vultures and wolves ate the dead pack animals, but not the human remains. At least some of the bodies, however, were disturbed by human grazers. When John James Audubon, the great American naturalist, visited Texas in 1837, he acquired five skulls from the battleground which he sent to a friend in Philadelphia to study, and there are other accounts of skulls being taken from the battlefield as souvenirs.

Peggy appealed to the Republic of Texas’ government for help burying the dead, but with no success. Eventually, the situation became intolerable for Peggy and her neighbors. According to William Zuber:

“When all their flesh had disappeared, the cattle of the locality chewed their [Mexican soldiers] bones, which imparted such a sickening odor and taste to the beef and milk that neither could be used. The citizens finally buried the bones, except for some of the skulls which the cattle could not chew, to stop the ruin of the beef and milk.”

Peggy returned to raising cattle, rebuilding her herd to 400 animals by 1850. With the aid of an enslaved man, she became one of the largest cattle herders in Harris County. Peggy McCormick died on July 30, 1859, when her house burned down, possibly as part of an attempt to rob her.

For more information about San Jacinto’s role in Texas history, go to visitsanjacinto.com.

OPPOSITE, TOP: The Texas Centennial Commission erected this marker in honor of Peggy McCormick in 1936. OPPOSITE, BELOW: Sam Houston told McCormick, “Madam, your land will be famed in history...”



BATTLE PLANS

Although it’s been hallowed ground for nearly two centuries, San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site has also served as a cemetery and, until recently, a 74-year berth for the Battleship Texas.

With the 1912 ship now undergoing essential repairs to its hull in Galveston (see photos of its journey on page 12), the site is poised to begin an exciting new chapter that focuses solely on the important story of the Battle of San Jacinto.

Plans for San Jacinto Battleground are in the works for future improvements, including renovating and expanding the museum, restoring the battleground and former ship site, adding interpretation at key battle events, and constructing immersive and interactive exhibits. Ideally, the site will also add staffing and equipment to help mitigate the significant changes, allowing this history to be experienced with a greater sense of place for visitors.

“These upgrades will make the site a world-class destination,” says Joseph Bell, the THC’s deputy executive director of historic sites.

Visitors to San Jacinto Battleground can keep an eye out for future improvements, including museum expansion and renovation, additional interpretation at key battle events, and new interactive exhibits.





ANCHORS AWEIGH

BATTLESHIP TEXAS BRIEFLY BACK ON THE WATER EN ROUTE TO SHIPYARD

The 110-year-old dreadnought Battleship Texas—a veteran of both world wars—left her berth at dawn on August 31 for a journey to Galveston to repair her hull. The battleship, which saw action in the invasions of Normandy (June 1944) and Southern France (August 1944), had been at San Jacinto Battleground in La Porte since 1948. The project was managed by the Battleship Texas Foundation with the THC, Texas Parks and Wildlife, and Harris County.





For more information about the ship,
visit battleshiptexas.org.

ABOVE: Battleship Texas passing under the Houston Ship Channel's Fred Hartman Bridge. OPPOSITE, LEFT TOP: The Texas backs out of her slip, preparing to leave San Jacinto. LEFT BOTTOM: Entering the Houston Ship Channel. RIGHT TOP: The view aft from Texas' stern. RIGHT BOTTOM: Aerial view. Courtesy Brent Gilley.

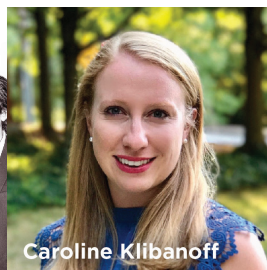
ABOVE: Battleship Texas arriving at Gulf Copper shipyard. RIGHT: Aerial view at the dry dock. Courtesy Brent Gilley. FAR RIGHT: The Texas' forward section of the starboard torpedo blister is removed.

Photos courtesy Battleship Texas Foundation unless credited otherwise.

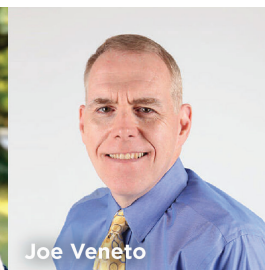


Presented by the Friends of the Texas Historical Commission in partnership with Phoenix I Restoration and Construction, LLC, the conference provides an opportunity for preservationists and officials to network and learn.

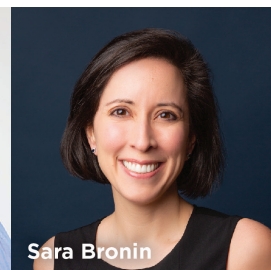
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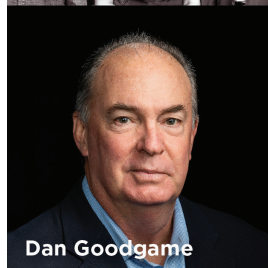
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To see a detailed
schedule or register
for the conference,
visit realplaces.us.

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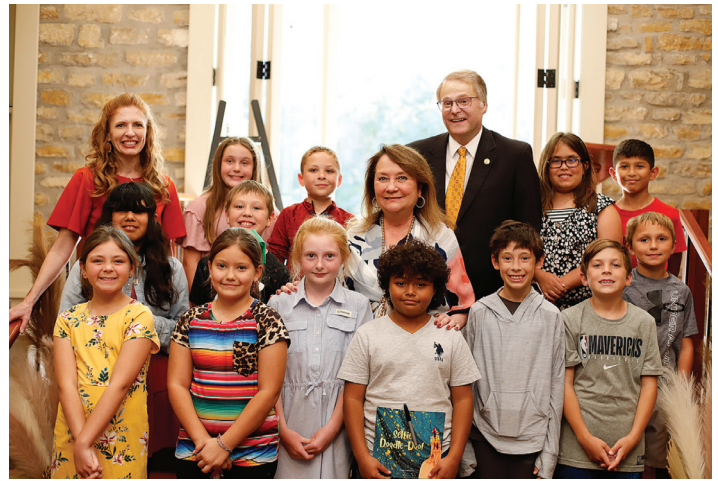
NEWS BRIEFS

FIRST LADY WELCOMES NEW MAIN STREET CITIES

On October 4, Texas First Lady Cecilia Abbott hosted welcoming celebrations in two new Main Street communities—Hamilton and Stephenville. She was joined by representatives of the Texas Main Street Program, Texas Historical Commission, Independent Bankers Association of Texas, and county officials.

Hamilton, located nearly 60 miles west of Waco, recently supported 15 private-sector rehabilitation projects and seven public-private projects, resulting in over \$1.4 million reinvested in downtown. This activity also netted a gain of seven businesses and 10 jobs. Downtown Hamilton has supported local businesses, created a walking tour brochure to highlight historic sites downtown, coordinated several new events, and launched a monthly newsletter.

Stephenville, located nearly 80 miles southwest of Fort Worth, has supported downtown businesses and expanded the Saturday Farmer's Market. Additionally, Stephenville Main Street has strengthened partnerships with Tarleton State University and other organizations, as well as planned several special events to promote downtown businesses and increase visitation.



Texas First Lady Cecilia Abbott, Rep. Shelby Slawson, and Texas Sen. Brian Birdwell met with fourth graders at Hamilton's First Lady's Main Street Tour.

Downtown Stephenville has had six private-sector rehabilitation projects, four public-private projects, and a net gain of eight businesses and 22 jobs.

Since 1981, every Texas First Lady has participated in the THC's First Lady's Main Street Tour, an event that features a public ceremony with her remarks and a reception to celebrate the community's entrance into the statewide Main Street program.

For more information, visit thc.texas.gov/mainstreet.

FIND UNIQUE HOLIDAY GIFTS AT STATE HISTORIC SITES IN TEXAS

Searching for the perfect holiday gift that supports the preservation of historic places in Texas? Plan your visit to any of the THC's state historic sites and explore museum stores to get inspiration.

Many sites offer unique gifts made by Texas artisans. A Christmas-themed tea towel makes a perfect gift. A custom hand-painted ornament from Kitty Keller Designs features the state's official longhorn herd at Fort Griffin. Fishing shirts, a custom pen-and-knife box set, and a whiskey decanter set are also available.



Do you know someone who'd love to trace the tracks of the Texas Revolution? There are many unique gifts available at Washington-on-the-Brazos, San Felipe de Austin, and San Jacinto Battleground. In addition,

the Museum Store at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg features a comprehensive collection of books and gift items.

Visit texashistoricsites.com for holiday hours of operation and a guide to the sites throughout Texas.

TXDOT SEEKS BRIDGE INPUT

The Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) Environmental Affairs Division, Historic Studies Branch is completing a statewide survey update of Texas' non-truss vehicular bridges and bridge-class culverts built in or before 1945, as well as masonry structures built through 1950.

Non-truss bridges can come in a variety of shapes (like arches, beams, and slabs), materials, and sizes. This project is a planning study that will provide TxDOT's National Register of Historic Places evaluations for bridges included in the study population, of which there are currently 3,793 bridges/bridge-class culverts. You can find more information about the project at bit.ly/3WcgIh5.

TxDOT's project team created an Interactive Comment Map (bit.ly/3gCW7C3) where Texans can share comments on specific bridges or provide general information about bridges or overall survey efforts. These comments will help shape the documentation and survey efforts for this statewide project.

For more information, visit txdot.gov.

WHERE ON EARTH...IN TEXAS

KNOW YOUR TEXAS HISTORY? Put your skills to the test by identifying the pictured site! The first three people who correctly identify the location will receive a prize and be named in the next issue of *The Medallion*. Send your answer to: *The Medallion*, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, TX 78711-2276 or email to medallion@thc.texas.gov. Limit one prize annually per contestant.

NEED A CLUE? This magnificent 1892 home/studio in Central Texas is now a museum in a venerable historic neighborhood.



ANSWER TO THE PHOTO FROM THE LAST ISSUE:

The photo at left is the former 1964 Brink's Coffee Shop, one of Dallas' finest remaining examples of Googie-style architecture. It was the first restaurant constructed for Norman Brinker and his first wife Maureen Connolly, both former U.S. Olympians who

went on to develop Bennigan's, Chili's, and Steak and Ale. It now houses Lucky's Hot Chicken.

Congratulations and eventual prizes go to the first readers who correctly identified the site: Bev Gavenda of Austin, Joy Pearce of Levelland, and Adare Siegel of Georgetown. Thanks to all who participated!

